

Fourth & Fifth Grade

Response to Literature

INSTRUCTION and PRACTICE

In 4th Grade and beyond, students are expected to write Response to Literature essays.

A Response to Literature essay needs to accomplish two things:

- 1.) the student needs to show an understanding of the story, and
- 2.) needs to respond to the story using examples from the story and from their “prior knowledge” (factual knowledge and life experiences they already possess).

The first is usually accomplished by the student including a summary of the story.

The second is usually accomplished by the student stating what the author was trying to say, the author’s main or big idea, the theme of the story, and sometimes by explaining how the main character has changed from the beginning of the story. This statement must be supported by examples from the story and can include additional examples from the student’s prior knowledge.

As a minimum, the two Response to Literature essay criteria can be accomplished in a two paragraph essay by 4th grade beginning writers. More accomplished writers should expand these two criteria into a five paragraph essay. This is explained in the practice materials that follow.

PRACTICE DIRECTIONS:

- Read through the writing instruction pages, “Steps to Writing a Response to Literature” essay and all of the handouts prior to doing the practice essay.
- Read the practice selection, “Elena in America.”
- Practice writing a two paragraph Response to Literature essay from the selection. It is recommended that you double space your writing for ease when proofreading, editing, revising, and re-writing.
- DO refer to the handouts during your practice writing.
- Use the Response to Literature Checklist to make sure your essay includes all of the elements of a good Response to Literature.

PRACTICE SELECTION

Elena in America By Robin Bloksberg

When Elena was little, she lived in Russia. Russia is a very big country. Even so, Elena's own world was small. All she knew was the little village where she and her family lived. Then when Elena was nine, her father told her, "Elena, we're moving to America."

When Elena's family first arrived in America, they stayed with her uncle in Evanston, Illinois. Evanston looked nothing like Russia. Elena felt very shy when she went into town. The people looked different from the people she knew in Russia. Everything seemed strange. Elena felt like a stranger. Being a stranger was no fun.

Then one day, Elena's father went to a nearby city. When he came back, he had a new job. "We're moving," he told the family—in Russian, of course. So Elena's family packed their things, again, and moved to Chicago.

Elena's father started his new job. Elena spent the rest of the summer exploring the city with her mother and sister. When they spoke Russian to each other, people would sometimes stare. It was not easy getting used to a new home. In Russia, Elena had lived in a little town. There were few people. She knew everyone. In Chicago, there were so many people! Elena and her family didn't know anyone. Elena wasn't sure she would be happy in America.

In September, Elena started school. She was nervous. There were other children at school from different countries. A boy named Ivan was also from Russia. It felt wonderful for Elena to talk with him in Russian. At Elena's school in Russia, she had lots of friends. At her new school, Elena knew only Ivan at first.

Sometimes Elena went walking with her mother and sister. One day, they found a Russian grocery store! They bought some dark bread and delicious sausage, just like they used to eat in Russia.

Ivan was a good friend, but sometimes Elena missed having girlfriends. Then she tried out for the basketball team. She was very proud when she made the team! She was even happier when the team members hugged her. Some of the girls on the basketball team became good friends to Elena. When she made mistakes in English, they helped her learn to say things the right way. As Elena's English got better, it was easier to make new friends. Some of the girls invited her to see a movie. Elena had not laughed so much since she had left Russia. She understood most of it, too!

One night, Elena invited her new friends to sleep over at her house. As a treat, her mother made them dumplings filled with meat. The girls like them. Elena told them they were called *piroshky*.

Sometimes Elena had dreams about Russia, her beautiful country. She can still picture the river that ran through the town where she lived. She can remember the taste of the salted fish she loved so well. Elena will always be a Russian girl. But she is also starting to feel like an American girl. Elena feels as if she has two homes—the one she left behind, and the beautiful one that she now loves.

Response to Literature: Writing Checklist

Use this checklist to help when revising and editing practice essays.
The checklist may not be used during the writing assignment session.

Did you...

Topic:

- _____ show your understanding (summarize) and respond to the story you read and not some other story or experiences?

Response to Literature (Summarize and Respond)

- _____ include the genre, title, and author (if given) in the topic sentence?
- _____ show your understanding of the story by summarizing and telling the main points of the story...its beginning, middle, and end?
- _____ tell the big idea, hidden meaning, theme of the story, or tell what the author really wanted the readers to learn from reading the story?
- _____ (if applicable) did you tell how a character changed from the beginning of the story to the end (e.g. he became more honest; he realized that having good friends really is important)?

Organization:

- _____ use focused paragraph structure (clear topic sentence/main idea/supporting details)?
- _____ have a concluding sentence to your essay that restates the topic sentence/main idea?
- _____ support your big idea, hidden meaning, or theme with evidence from the story itself, to include some exact text quotes from the story?
- _____ support your big idea, hidden meaning, or theme with personal experiences and prior knowledge?

Sentence Structure:

- _____ vary your sentences, usually by varying your sentence beginnings? (no two sentences begin with the same two words)

Conventions:

- _____ use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization?
- _____ indent each paragraph?
- _____ correctly use quotation marks when quoting examples from

Steps to Writing a Response to Literature Essay

These steps are written for 4th & 5th grade essays, and they teach the student to write a solid two paragraph Response to Literature essay.

The first paragraph is designed to show the student's understanding of the selection. The second paragraph is designed to state what the author was trying to say and support it with examples from the text and from the student's prior knowledge.

First Paragraph

1. Read the entire selection. Plan your topic sentence using the three-part topic sentence graphic organizer called: "NAME IT – VERB IT – FINISH IT".

Memorize and draw this topic sentence organizer when planning the topic sentence for your writing assignment. Refer to the verb chart when selecting the verb.

- a. Topic Sentence: Blank graphic organizer.

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- b. Topic Sentence: Graphic organizer explained.

NAME IT.	VERB IT.	FINISH IT.
Identify the text (genre/ title/ author) Genre: usually a short story Titles of stories: are in quotes Titles of books: are underlined (See titles chart for quote/underline)	Select a verb. is about (See verb chart for more verb suggestions)	Finish your thought. Finish the sentence with the main idea of the text.

2. Re-write your writing assignment topic sentence from your graphic organizer onto the lines below to look like a real sentence. Fix spelling and capitalization errors. Remember to indent.

3. Now write the body of your first paragraph.

Identify the main characters in the story.

Identify the setting of the story (where the story took place).

Include the main characters and the setting in the first, next, and last sentences you will now write:

Begin with a transition word, and write a sentence to describe what happened first in the story.

Begin with a transition word, and write a sentence to describe what happened next in the story.

Begin with a final transition word, and write a sentence to describe what happened last in the story.

(Be sure you have included any main details that are necessary to the story).

4. Combine your topic sentence with the body sentences to write your first paragraph, a summary of the selection to show your understanding of the selection.

5. A template for the first paragraph would look like this:

(Indent) The (genre), (title, probably in quotes), by (author) is about (what you want the reader to think). First, _____.

Then, _____

_____. Next, _____

_____. Finally, _____.

Second Paragraph

- 1. Use the following template to help you write your second paragraph. The purpose of the second paragraph is to respond to the selection. Here the student needs to identify the main or big idea of the selection, the theme, or answer the question..."What was the author trying to say?"**
- 2. Begin your second paragraph with a topic sentence in which you explain what the author wants us to know...the main or big idea, or theme.**

(Indent) The author wants us to know _____.
(paragraph 2 topic sentence)

He/she shows us this in the story when _____
(example from the text)

_____. He/she lets us see this again _____.
(example from the text)

I have experienced this in my own life after _____
(example from prior knowledge)

The main message in this story is _____.
(restatement of the paragraph 2 topic sentence)

Now let's look at the short story, "One Day in May," to see what a student's essay might look like using the Paragraph 1 and Paragraph 2 templates.

One Day in May

By Kitty Coulton

Spring had come to the city. At least the calendar said so. There it was, in big bold letters, May. But when Lin looked out her window, everything looked gray. She saw no trees bursting with pale green buds. No candy-colored flowers poking through the ground. No bluebirds carrying twigs and leaves to line their nests. Not even a black and yellow bee. All she saw was gray. Gray walls and roofs. Gray streets and gray steam rising from the gates. A patch of gray sky between the tall gray buildings.

She went outside, sat on her gray stoop, and sighed. She thought about spring at her old house in the country. "I wish we had never moved to the city," she said to her gray cat, Cleo. A fat tear rolled down Lin's cheek. Cleo leaped off the stoop to chase a pigeon.

"My, you look like a storm cloud," said a sunny voice. Lin looked up, startled. A woman was sitting on the tree stump in front of her building.

"Huh?" Lin said, wiping her eyes. The city was crowded with people. But she had never seen anyone like this. The woman's eyes gleamed like pieces of blue sea glass. Her hair was piled up like a bird's nest, woven with trigs and leaves. Her skirt was a deep velvety green, soft as the mossy floor of the forest.

Cleo stopped chasing the pigeon and stared. (Being a cat, she didn't care about being rude.) Then, to Lin's horror, Cleo jumped straight onto the woman's head. "Oh!" Lin cried out laughing. "I'm sorry. Cleo, you get down from there, you bad cat." But Cleo was already half buried in the woman's tangled mass of hair.

Lin remembered that she was in a very bad mood. She started to scowl again.

"Tell me what's troubling you on such a lovely day," the woman said. Just then, the pigeon landed on her shoulder. "Hellooooo!" she cooed at it.

"It's not a lovely day at all!" Lin said. "I hate the city. Back where I used to live, spring meant flowers and birds and blue sky. Here everything is just gray and dead."

The pigeon squawked loudly. "He says, 'What's wrong with gray?'" the woman told Lin. Cleo poked her head out and meowed her agreement. Lin shrugged and kicked at the stump.

"You shouldn't kick trees," the woman said gently.

"But it is just a dead stump!" Lin said, and she kicked it again because that was the mood she was in. The woman jumped to her feet and pointed down. A branch had sprouted up where she was sitting.

"Sometimes you don't notice what's right in front of your nose," she said. Lin folded her arms stubbornly. "Or what's right outside your window," the woman added. She pointed to a pile of gray twigs perched on Lin's building.

Lin heard a faint chirp, chirp. Suddenly a large bird swooped down to the ledge, and the chirps grew louder. "A nest of baby falcons," the woman said. Cleo's eyes grew as round as moons. "Nature isn't just bright colors," said the woman. Gray has its place too. Without gray skies and rain, there would be no flowers. And no worms to feed the baby birds." She paused and then added, half to herself, "But maybe there **has** been too much rain lately."

Just then, a bright burst of sun made Lin shade her eyes. Neighbors appeared on their stoops. They smiled and lifted their heads to the warmth, as contented as Cleo. "It really is

spring!” Lin said. She ran up the stairs and into her house. She grabbed her brother, who was in front of his computer, as always.

“But I don’t want to go outside!” he cried as they reached the doorway. “It’s just a dumb old gray—the streets were soaked in sunshine. The city was bursting with the colors and sounds of spring.

Lin looked for her new friend, but she was gone. A patch of pink tulips had sprouted in her place. Cleo lay beside them, licking her sun warmed fur.

One Day in May - Analyzed

STUDENT ESSAY:

The story, “One Day in May,” by Kitty Coulton, *tells* how Lin learns that even though the world looks gray, spring is just waiting to appear. In the beginning of the story, Lin is disappointed because everything is gray. Then an unusual lady appears and things start to change. Finally spring has come and there are all kinds of colors besides gray.

What the author really wants us to know is that even if things look gray, spring will come. The mysterious lady reminded Lin that the stump really was alive. The gray twigs really were a nest for falcons, and the gray skies really held the rain to help the flowers grow. If you look closely, you can see the signs of spring even though the world looks gray.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT SAMPLE:

Beginning level Responses to Literature can be organized into two paragraphs. More accomplished writers or older students will expand these two paragraphs into five paragraphs.

FIRST PARAGRAPH

The first paragraph is a summary of the story. The topic sentence tells what the story is about...the main idea of the story, and includes the format “Name It”, “Verb It”, “Finish It”.

The topic sentence begins with the “Name It”...the genre (*story*), the title (“*One Day in May*” in quotes), and the author (*Kitty Coulton*), followed by the “Verb It” (*tells*), followed by the “Finish It” (*how Lin learns that even though the world is gray, spring is just waiting to appear*).

A recommended graphic organizer for students to use to plan their topic sentence would look like this:

Name It (genre, title, author)	Verb It	Finish It
The story, “One Day in May,” by Kitty Coulton	tells	how Lin learns that even though the world looks gray, spring is just waiting to appear.

After the topic sentence, the rest of the paragraph is a summary of the story stating the main plot events, the beginning, middle, and end:

Beginning: *In the beginning of the story, Lin is disappointed because everything is gray.*

Middle: *Then an unusual lady appears and things start to change.*

End: *Finally spring has come and there are all kinds of colors besides gray.*

If there are significant details, a detail sentence can be included after each main idea sentence.

SECOND PARAGRAPH

The second paragraph begins with the topic sentence stating what the author wanted the reader to learn/know, the main/big idea, or theme of the story.

What the author really wants us to know is that even if things look gray, spring will come.

The topic sentence big idea or theme in the second paragraph must be supported and explained with examples.

Most examples should come from the story, but others can come from the student's prior experience/knowledge. In this student's response, all examples come from the story.

The topic sentence: *"...even if things look gray, spring will come".*

Example 1: *The mysterious lady reminded Lin that the stump really was alive.*

Example 2: *The gray twigs really were a nest for falcons...*

Example 3: *...and the gray skies really held the rain to help the flowers grow.*

The last sentence of the essay is the "tie-it-up" sentence. It is a re-stating of the topic sentence of the second paragraph.

If you look closely, you can see the signs of spring even though the world looks gray.

Expand to Five Paragraphs

(A paragraph must have at least three sentences to be considered a paragraph).

Introductory Paragraph

Hook Sentence: An interesting, clever quote or one-liner that makes the reader want to read the rest of your essay.

Brief Summary:

Topic sentence (Name It, Verb It, Finish It). Connects to the “Hook” sentence.

A sentence to explain what happened at the beginning of the story.

A sentence to explain what happened next in the story.

A sentence to explain what happened last in the story.

Thesis Sentence: States the big or main idea, the theme of the selection, how the main character changed in the story, or what the author wanted the reader to learn. The sentence includes the three main ideas used to broadly support the thesis. In Write Reflections, this is called the “Rainbow” sentence.

Body Paragraph #1

Main Idea #1: Paragraph topic sentence. Begins with transition word(s). Broadly explains the first main idea supporting your thesis. In Write Reflections, this would be the orange sentence.

Detail / Example: Provides evidence from the text to prove your main idea supports the thesis (be sure to use quotes when using exact text for your example). In Write Reflections, this would be a yellow sentence.

Commentary: Comments on and explains the importance of the detail, why you chose it, and why it is important to the essay. In Write Reflections, this would be a black “Elaboration” to the detail sentence.

Body Paragraph #2

Main Idea #2: Paragraph topic sentence. Begins with transition word(s). Broadly explains the first main idea supporting your thesis. In Write Reflections, this would be the green sentence.

Detail / Example: Provides evidence from the text to prove your main idea supports the thesis (be sure to use quotes when using exact text for your example). In Write Reflections, this would be a blue sentence.

Commentary: Comments on and explains the importance of the detail, why you chose it, and why it is important to the essay. In Write Reflections, this would be a black “Elaboration” to the detail sentence.

Body Paragraph #3

Main Idea #2: Paragraph topic sentence. Begins with transition word(s). Broadly explains the first main idea supporting your thesis. In Write Reflections, this would be the brown sentence.

Detail / Example: Provides evidence from the text to prove your main idea supports the thesis (be sure to use quotes when using exact text for your example). In Write Reflections, this would be a purple sentence.

Commentary: Comments on and explains the importance of the detail, why you chose it, and why it is important to the essay. In Write Reflections, this would be a black “Elaboration” to the detail sentence.

NOTE: Each Body Paragraph can have 2-3 Detail sentences and 2-3 Commentaries for each Detail sentence.

Conclusion Paragraph

Re-state the “Brief Summary” topic sentence.

Re-state the “Thesis” or “Rainbow” sentence.

Wrap it up sentence. This sentence relates back to the original hook of the essay. (If your essay began with a question, then answer the question in the last sentence of the essay).

Response to Literature Topic Sentence

Verbs for “Verb It”

List A: A good place to start! The word “is about” works as a verb for most topic sentences when summarizing a piece of literature, but it is not very specific. Once you get used to writing topic sentences, try using some of the other words that are more vivid and precise.

is about

	tells	compares
describes	gives	presents
lists	shows	defines

List B: Now try these!

acknowledges	evaluates	supports
adds	explores	confuses
advises	expresses	defends
asserts	features	depicts
teaches	furnishes	encourages
confirms	names	illustrates
confronts	offends	invites
considers	offers	judges
contrasts	predicts	misjudges
critiques	proposes	praises
demonstrates	provides	recommends
denounces	traces	simplifies
discourages	answers	solves

Titles

When Do I Underline (or Italicize)?

When Do I Use Quotation Marks?

All titles must either be put in quotation marks, or underlined (use italics when keyboarding). **Most of the time, the selection you will be asked to summarize will be an article of some kind, and titles of articles are always put in quotes.**

Use Quotation Marks for:

newspaper article titles
magazine article titles
poem titles
short story titles
song titles
episodes of radio shows
episodes of television shows
subdivisions of books

Use Underline (or Italics) for:

title of books
name of magazines
name of newspapers
title of plays
title of films
name of encyclopedias
title of long poems
title of radio programs
title of comic strips
title of software
title of pieces of art

To help you remember whether to use quotes or underline a title, ask yourself, “Would I carry this text under my arm, or put it in a file folder?”

FILE FOLDER = Quotes

UNDER THE ARM = Underline (or Italics)

Under the Arm: You could carry a book, a newspaper, a magazine, or one volume to a set of encyclopedias under your arm. The titles of a book, newspaper, magazine, or encyclopedia are underlined. When you think of a play, the script of a movie, and the script of a television program typed and bound, it would be big enough to carry under your arm.

File Folder: Think of a file folder when you want to remember what gets quotation marks. If you could carry the item in a file folder, the title of the item will need quotation marks when you write it out. A poem, the lyrics to a song, and an article from the daily paper could all fit into your file folder, so the titles of these items all need quotation marks.

Transition Words for Response to Literature First, Next, and Last Summary Sentences

Words to begin “What happened first” sentences:

The story began
The first thing that happened
The story took place
To begin with
Early in the morning

Words to begin “What happened next” sentences:

After that
It continued that
The next thing that happened
The (characters) were later....
Then
Later that day
Next

Words to begin “What happened at the end” sentences:

By the end
The story ended
The last thing that happened
Lastly
By evening
The (characters) found/destroyed/emptied/removed/crowned